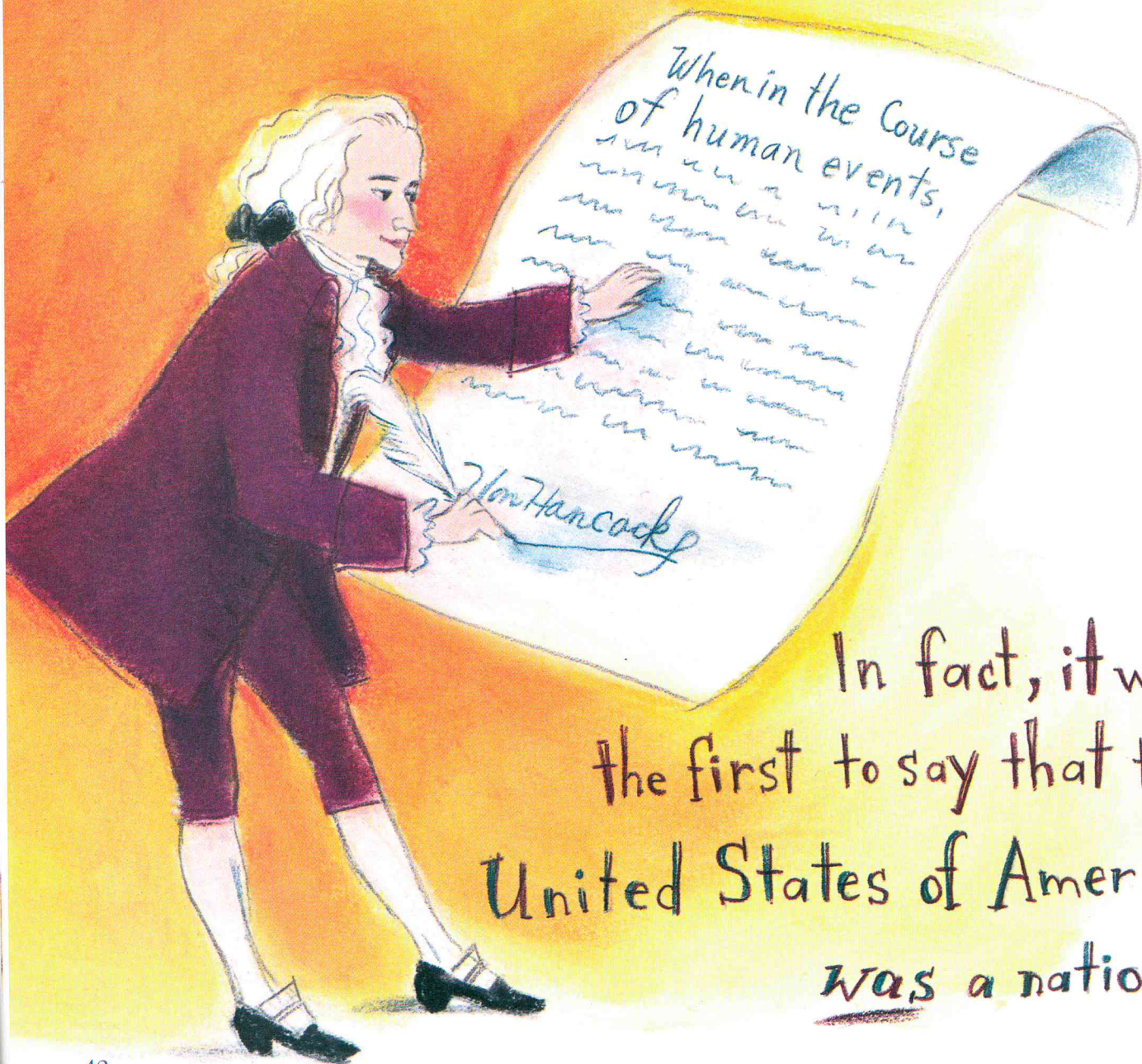


The DECLARATION
of INDEPENDENCE
is the most important document
in our nation's history.



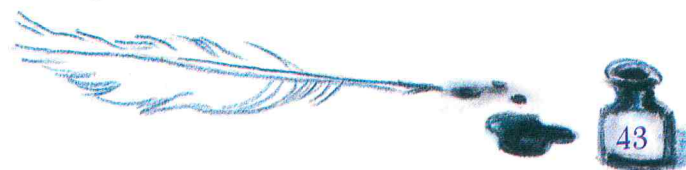
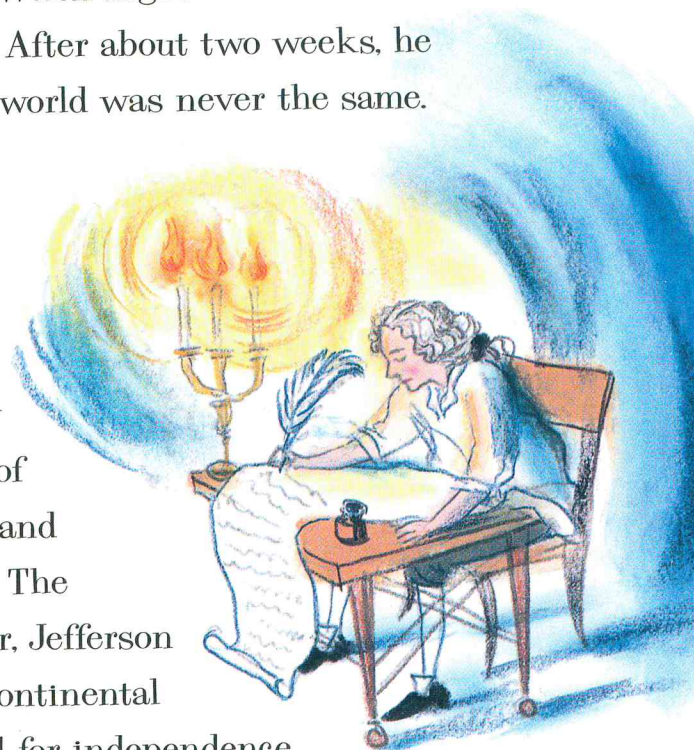
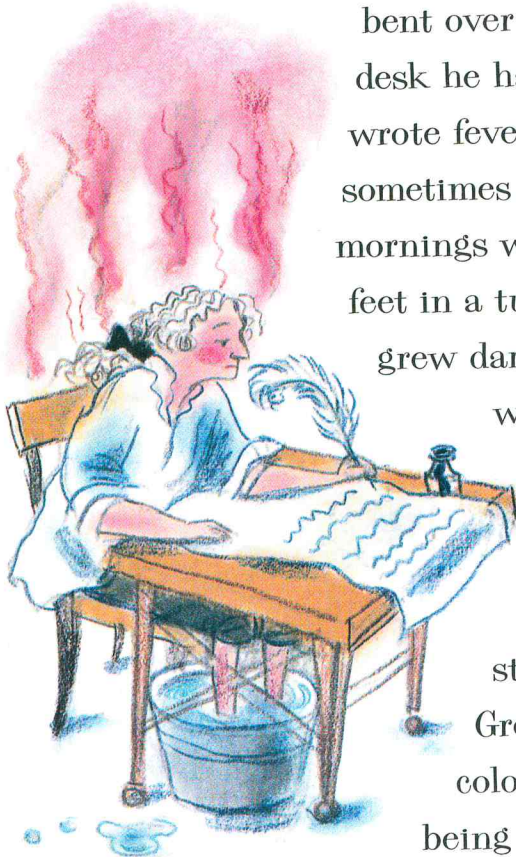
In fact, it was
the first to say that the
United States of America
was a nation!

Thomas Jefferson had rented rooms in a house in Philadelphia in June 1776. They were across from a horse stable, which meant plenty of pesky horseflies! Day after day, Jefferson

bent over the portable writing desk he had invented himself. He wrote feverishly with his quill, sometimes standing up! When the mornings were too hot, he soaked his feet in a tub of cold water. When night grew dark, he lit candles. After about two weeks, he was finished. The world was never the same.

In 1775, the 13 colonies in America still belonged to Great Britain. Many colonists were tired of being governed, taxed, and bullied by the British. They fought back. The Revolutionary War broke out. A year later, Jefferson and his fellow members of the Second Continental Congress made a bold choice: They voted for independence. Now they just had to tell Great Britain.

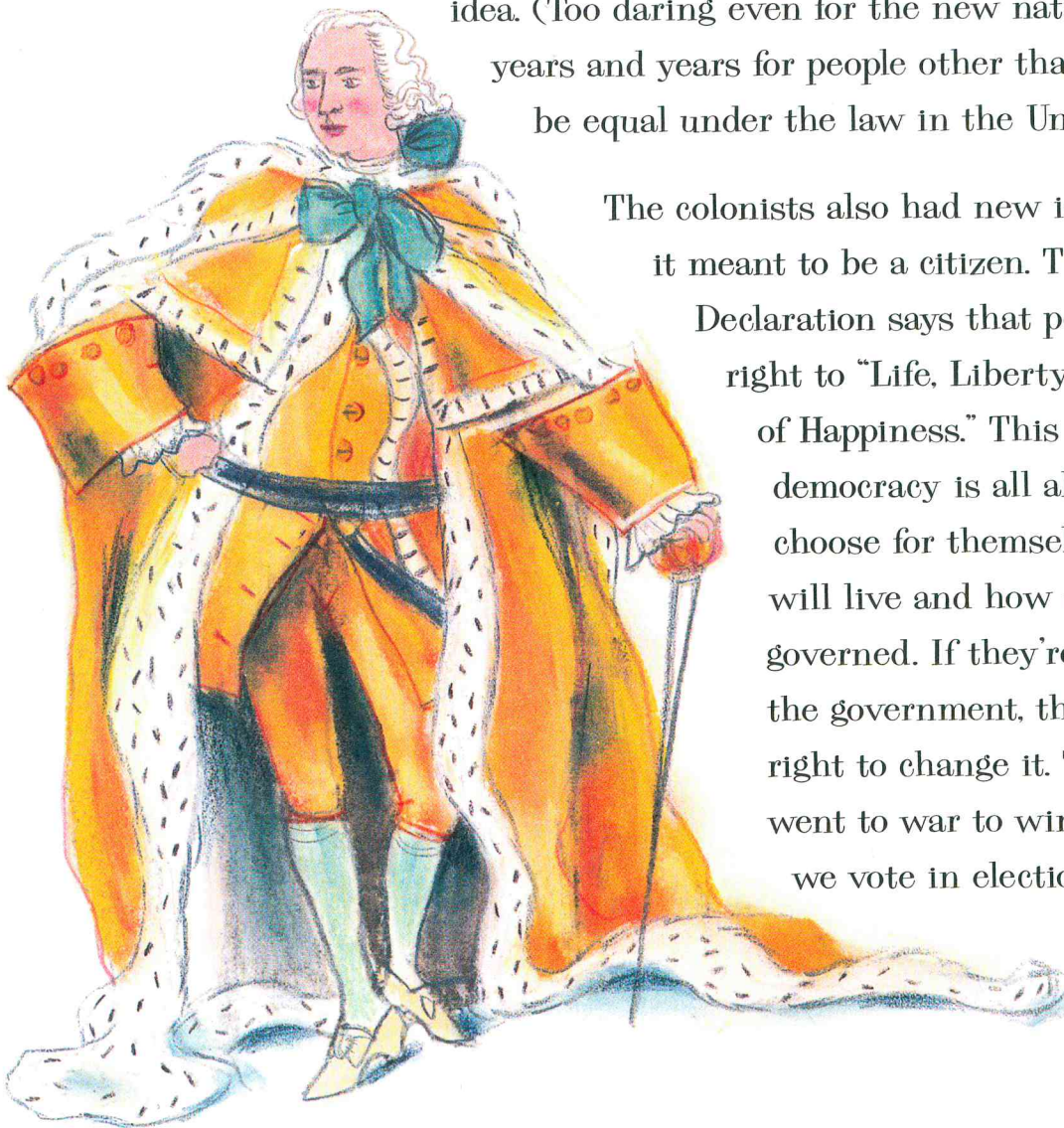
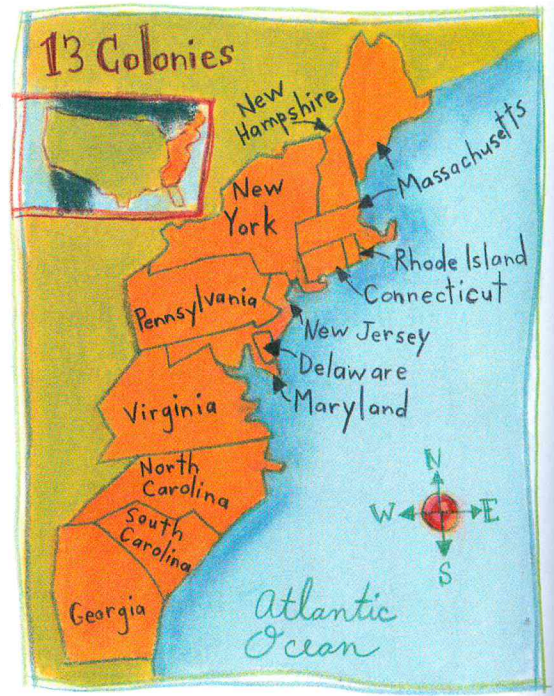
Congress wanted a statement explaining why the colonies should be free. Jefferson was well-read and a good writer. He was asked to write a draft for Congress. Words did not fail him! Jefferson organized the ideas and arguments of the Declaration of Independence into three

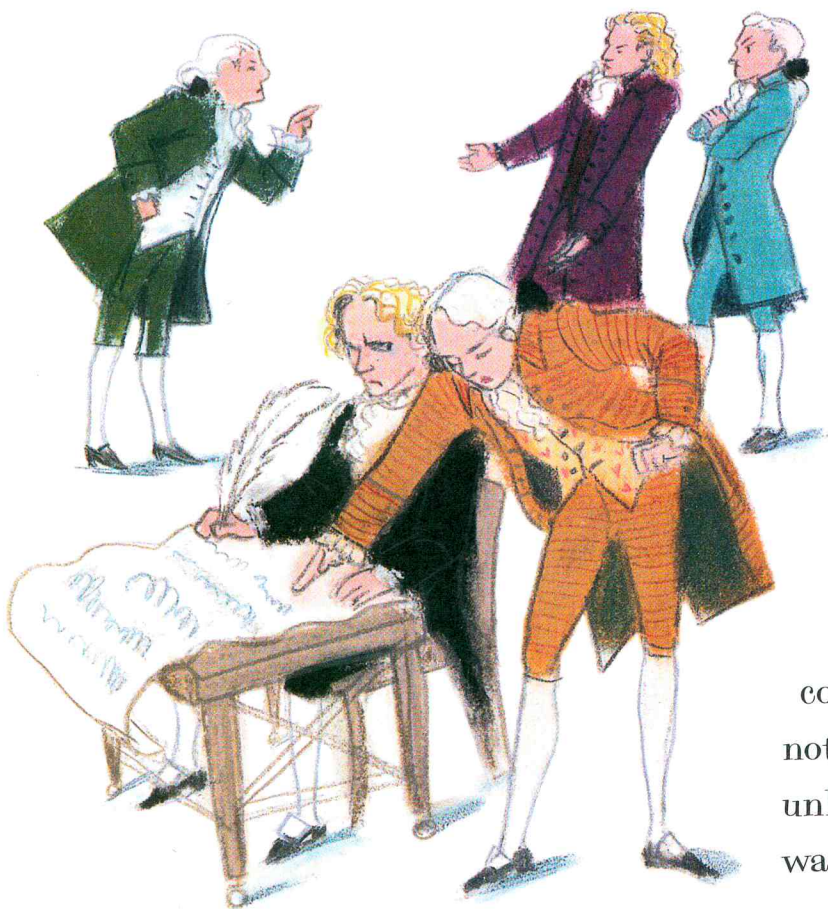


parts. The first part tells what rights people deserve and how they should be governed. The second part lists the unfair or wrong things Great Britain's king did to the colonies. The third part declares the colonies free, independent states. Nothing like it had ever been written before.

The Declaration of Independence is a powerful statement about freedom, liberty, and equality. It says right up front that "all men are created equal." Most of the world at the time was ruled by kings or queens. Equality was a daring idea. (Too daring even for the new nation! It took years and years for people other than white men to be equal under the law in the United States.)

The colonists also had new ideas about what it meant to be a citizen. That's why the Declaration says that people have the right to "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." This is what our democracy is all about. People choose for themselves how they will live and how they will be governed. If they're unhappy with the government, they have the right to change it. The colonists went to war to win this right. Now, we vote in elections to keep it.





Congress debated the Declaration of Independence for three days. They made 86 changes to Jefferson's draft, including one very serious change. They cut out Jefferson's attack on the slave trade. Slavery existed in Northern and Southern colonies. Some delegates would not support the Declaration unless the antislavery passage was removed.

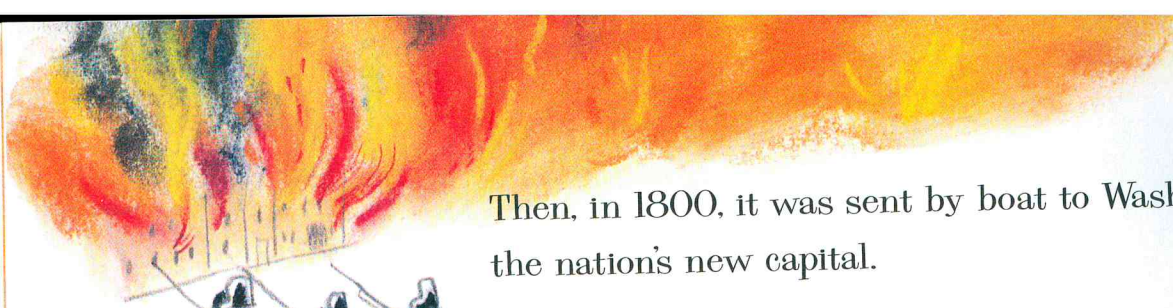
On July 4, 1776, Congress voted to approve the Declaration of Independence. John Hancock, the president of the Continental Congress, signed it. He wrote his name really big. He wanted the British king to see it without his glasses!

The Declaration was then copied onto a piece of parchment, which the other members of Congress present signed on August 2, 1776. Signing meant you were a traitor to the king—and you could be hanged!

During the Revolutionary War, Congress had to keep one step ahead of the British army. They rolled up the Declaration of Independence and took it with them.

After the war, it was stored in several different houses in Philadelphia.

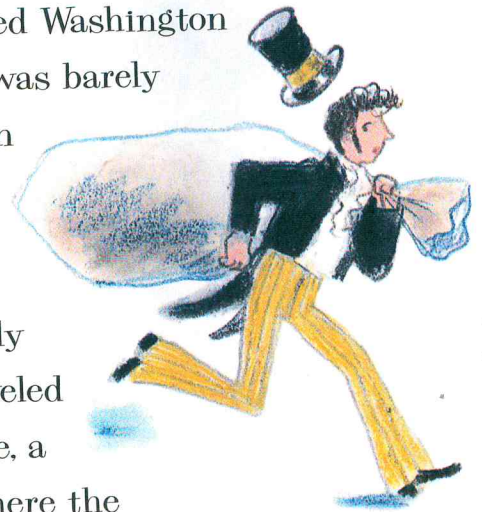




Then, in 1800, it was sent by boat to Washington, D.C., the nation's new capital.



The British attacked and burned Washington during the War of 1812. There was barely time to wrap the Declaration in a linen sack and cart it off to a safe house in Virginia.



During World War II, the Declaration was secretly packed into a metal box sealed with lead. It traveled by truck and train to Louisville, Kentucky. There, a whole cavalry troop escorted it to Fort Knox, where the government stores its gold.

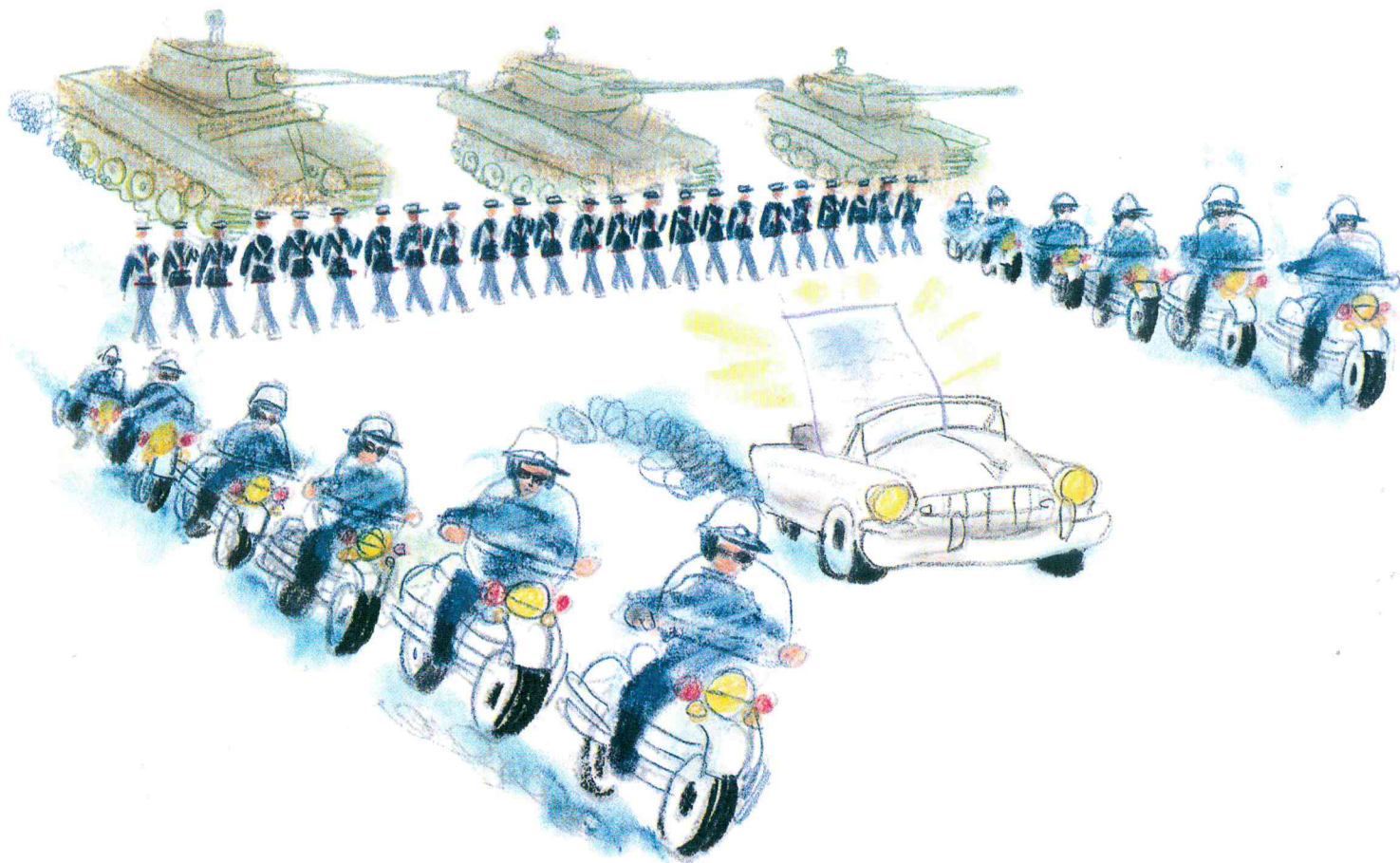
The ideas of the Declaration of Independence will never fade—but its ink did! So, in the 1820s, a copy was made. The printing process got the Declaration wet. The ink faded some more.



Then the Declaration hung for 35 years in a government office in Washington, D.C. Sunlight beat down on it through a window. The parchment dried out and cracked. The ink kept fading. The Declaration, now nearly 100 years old, was disappearing!

Modern science saved the day! In 1952, protected by tanks, marines, and motorcycle squads, the Declaration of Independence was moved to its new home in the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C.

In 2003, the National Archives opened the Charters of Freedom exhibit. The Declaration, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights are all displayed



in bulletproof metal cases. The cases are filled with a special gas and have special glass to protect the documents from pollution and sunlight. A computerized camera spots changes on the documents that are invisible to the human eye! At night, the cases slide into vaults in the wall.

Right after the Declaration of Independence was approved, John Hancock asked a Philadelphia printer to make several hundred copies for Congress. As far as we know, there are only 25 of these copies left. One of them was a very lucky find! In 1989, a man bought a picture for \$4 at a Pennsylvania flea market. He only wanted the frame. When he took out the torn picture, he found one of the copies of the Declaration hidden behind it. He sold the Declaration for 2.42 million dollars. In 2000, it was resold for 8.14 million dollars!

